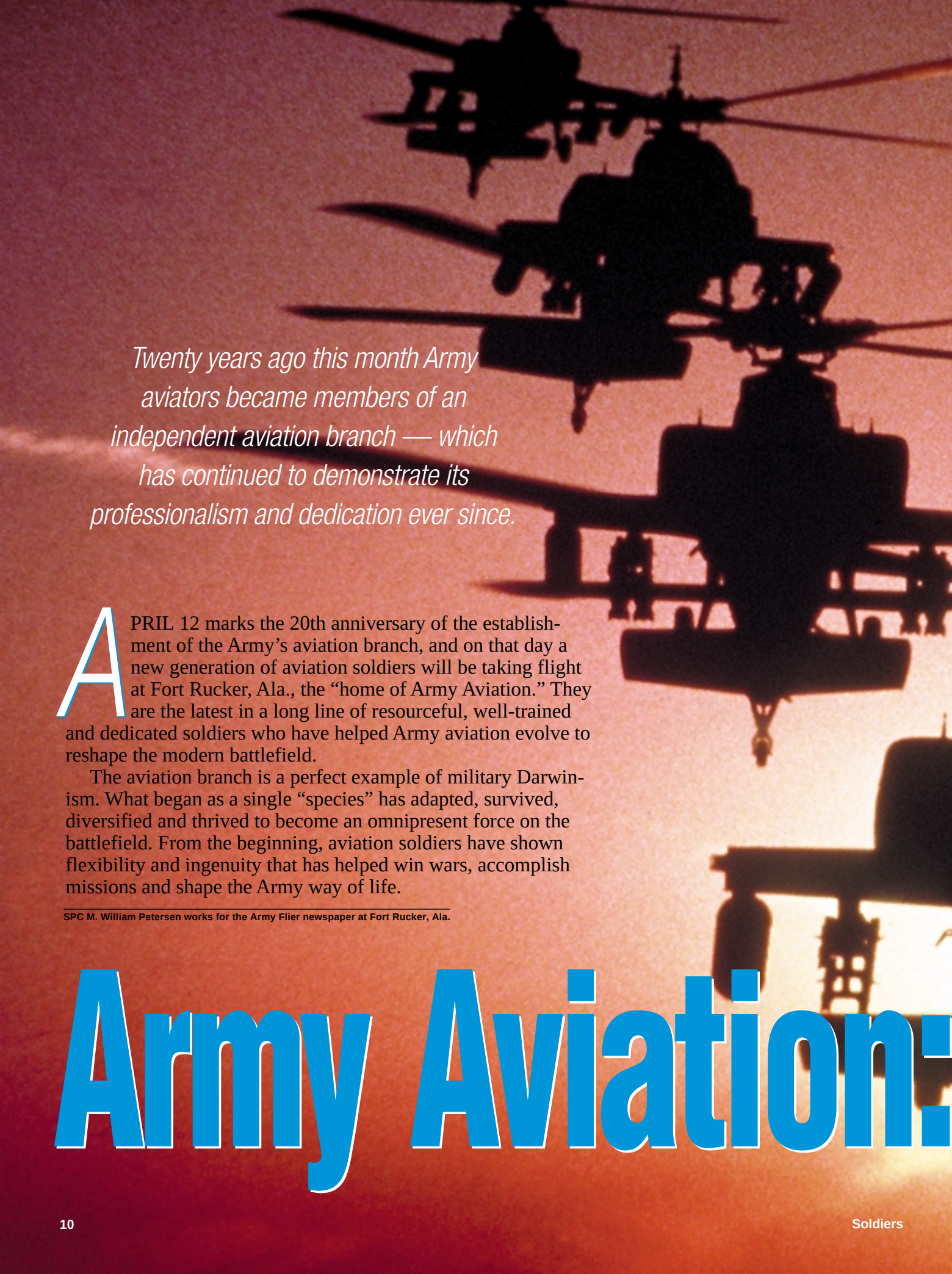

Twenty years ago this month Army aviators became members of an independent aviation branch — which has continued to demonstrate its professionalism and dedication ever since.

Army Aviation:

APRIL 12 marks the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Army's aviation branch, and on that day a new generation of aviation soldiers will be taking flight at Fort Rucker, Ala., the "home of Army Aviation." They are the latest in a long line of resourceful, well-trained and dedicated soldiers who have helped Army aviation evolve to reshape the modern battlefield.

The aviation branch is a perfect example of military Darwinism. What began as a single "species" has adapted, survived, diversified and thrived to become an omnipresent force on the battlefield. From the beginning, aviation soldiers have shown flexibility and ingenuity that has helped win wars, accomplish missions and shape the Army way of life.

SPC M. William Petersen works for the Army Flier newspaper at Fort Rucker, Ala.

Flying High at 20

By SPC M. William Petersen

The Dawn of Army Aviation

The earliest manifestation of modern Army aviation was the L-4 Grasshopper, which saw World War II service as a medevac aircraft, an observer for artillery, an airborne communications relay and, occasionally, even as an attack aircraft.

"These basic threads of versatility and flexibility are expressed in the origin of organic Army aviation," said Dr. James Williams, Aviation Branch historian at Fort Rucker. "This continued in Korea, where the Transportation Corps capitalized on the advantage of rotary-wing technology to form helicopter companies. There was also a non-doctrinal response to the need for aeromedical evacuation."

Larger, troop-carrying helicopters also made their combat debut in Korea, which led to the establishment of airmobile and air-assault units.

"In Vietnam, aviation became central to the whole fight," said Williams. "If you took aviation out of Vietnam, you wouldn't have Vietnam."

The Vietnam War also prompted the development of the attack helicopter, with armed UH-1s eventually giving way to the purpose-built AH-1 Cobra.

Army aviation soon adapted to perform a diverse list of missions, including resupply, troop movement, gunfire support, medevac, communications, and command and control. "The Army emerged from Vietnam as an aviation-dependant organization. Vietnam also allowed for tremendous displays of ingenuity and courage on the part of aviation soldiers," Williams said.

Though aviation had been part of the Army since the days of Civil War observation balloons, it was the Vietnam War that shaped modern Army aviation.

Simulators — from the older UH-1 model through the latest Apache and Comanche systems — have revolutionized Army flight training.

Technology has played an equally important role in the training of enlisted aviation technicians, allowing them to master increasingly sophisticated systems.

A Branch Emerges

Army aviation in the aftermath of Vietnam was a house divided — assets were attached to artillery, infantry and transportation units. These aviation companies became larger than company-sized, and the need to professionalize aviation became apparent. The aviators in the Army were beginning to have more aviation demands put on them, yet they were still members of different branches.

"With the development of complex, post-Vietnam aircraft systems, aviators were getting stretched between their branches and their aviation duties," Williams said. "The 1983 establishment of the aviation branch means we've now got a population that concentrates the bulk of its efforts on mastering the capabilities of aviation."

Aviation began to take its modern shape and refined its mission of supporting ground troops in every way through the use of off-the-shelf technology and doctrinal changes.

Pioneered during the Vietnam War and refined ever since, the concept of air mobility — the rapid movement of soldiers and materiel by helicopter — has helped the Army dominate the battlefield.

Continually Evolving

The various "species" of Army aviation continue to develop through Army Transformation.

The AH-64D Apache Longbow, for example, has evolved as an airframe for the 21st century that can recognize and prioritize targets in seconds. And the development of the RAH-66 Comanche as a versatile armed reconnaissance helicopter signals a new generation of aircraft.

"There are a lot of things we're working on for the future of aviation," said LTC Bob Johnson, chief of the Futures Development Division in the Directorate of Combat Developments at the U.S. Army Aviation Center. "Aviation is actually a leading part of the Objective Force; we're already fielding technology for the Comanche and the Objective Force. As we move to a lighter Army, we make up for that weight with situational awareness and understanding."

Currently in the works at DCD are a new heavy-lift helicopter; the teaming of unmanned aerial vehicles with the Longbow and Comanche; and developing "air lines of communication" intended to eliminate the need for hundreds of trucks to resupply troops in the field, Johnson said.

"More than at any other time, aviation is growing to handle such new missions as reconnaissance, mobile strike and sustainment — because we're the best for it," Johnson said.

Airframes that have become a staple of aviation operations are being upgraded for the Objective Force as well.

"The modernization of the UH-60 and CH-47 are the two biggest projects we're working on now," said MAJ Barry Higgs, chief of DCD's Combat Aircraft Division. "A digital platform in the cockpit will allow us to talk with other systems on the battlefield. We're also building an increased operability and performance enhancement."

What began with the single-engine L-4 is now a dominant presence on the battlefield and plays a role in missions around the world.

"It all goes back to the quality of people in Army aviation. Across the board, you won't find better people. They take seriously what they need to do and have the brainpower to make good on their missions," Williams said.

As the Army looks to the future, there will be the aviation branch, 20 years young with a lifetime of experience and, as always, "Above the Best." □

From the all-weather AH-64D *(left)* to the all-purpose UH-60 *(above),* Army aviation has the right aircraft for every job soldiers may encounter.

The Army's advances in managing air traffic — both in peace and war — help ensure both the effectiveness of aviation operations and the safety of soldiers.